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15. POLITICS AND THE RACE ISSUE AS PRESENTED IN THE WORKS OF AFRO AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS OF THE 19TH CENTURY

by

Rennie Simson

Preface

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In June, 1981 the Fifth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women took place in Poughkeepsie, New York. One of the speakers at the Conference was Professor Marquita James of Nassau Community College in Garden City, Long Island; she noted that

> Black women believe they are oppressed not by black men but by white society. Black women are almost unanimous in their insistence that their own liberation depends on the liberation of their race and the improvements of the life of the black community. White feminists must immediately begin to recognize that black women are foremost victims of oppression in this country because of their color, not their sex.[1]

Nineteenth Century Afro American women were keenly aware of the racial difficulties Blacks in this country encountered and they addressed themselves often and eloquently to the problems of being Black in white America. Sometimes they voiced their concerns in a straight forward and outspoken manner; at other times their approach was subtle, but their anger at being the victims of an unjust society is evident in many of their works.

Clearly anyone who has been the victim, either directly or indirectly, of an institution such as slavery is going to be profoundly and negatively affected by the experience and feel little love for the government that forced him into slavery. Even the slaveholding President of the United States, Thomas Jefferson, showed his awareness of this when he wrote in Notes on the State of Virginia, "if a slave can have a country in this world, it must be any other in preference to that in which he is born to live and labor for another."[2] Few Black women had their works published before the Civil War; among the more notable pre Civil War Afro American women authors were Eleanor Eldridge, Ann Plato, Frances Harper and Harriet Jacobs.

Eldridge, a Northerner, stated in her autobiography Memoirs (1841)

that she was certain that many of her problems were the direct result of being a black woman; she was confident that no white women would have been subjected to the manifold dignities which she frequently experienced.

While Eldridge described the problems of a free Black woman of the North, the other three women just mentioned addressed themselves more directly than Eldridge to the institution of slavery. Plato, writing in 1841 before abolitionist support of Black writers reached its pre Civil War height, was more cautious in her observations. In her poem "To The First of August" she celebrated Britain's freeing of the slaves in all those countries under its rule, and she expressed longing for the day when there would be no slaves anywhere.

> Lift ye that country's (England) banner high, and
> may it nobly wave Until beneath the azure sky
> Man shall be no more a slave.[3]

Plato used subtlety in her indictment of the minority position in America in her poem "The Natives of America." In this poem she presented an imaginary dialogue between a father and son in which the son pleaded with his father to tell him the history of his people and the father obliged.

> He (the father) thus began: "We were a happy race,
> When we no tongue but ours did trace."[4]

It would hardly be reading too much into these lines to conjecture that Plato felt that the Afro-Americans as well as the Native Americans were happier before their encounter with the white man.

Frances Harper, whose long career as a writer spanned almost half a century, published her first works prior to the Civil War. In the poem, "The Dying Fugitive," published in the Anglo African Magazine in 1859, Harper presented the tragic picture of a slave trying to escape to freedom and dying just before he reached his longed for goal. She did an excellent job of presenting the pathos of a situation where death was the only escape from slavery on which the bondsman could depend. In her article "The Greatest Want," also published in the Anglo African Magazine of 1859, Harper stated that the greatest need of Black people in America was not for money but for an unselfish and total dedication to emancipation from slavery.

The comments of the pre Civil War autobiographer, Harriet Jacobs, included not only comments on her sexploitation but on the brutalities of slavery experienced by both sexes. One of the most vivid passages of her autobiography gives a graphic account of a form of punishment which she frequently saw meted out to slaves on a neighboring plantation. A rope was fastened about the victim's body and he was suspended from the ground. Over him a fire was kindled from which a piece of fat pork was hung and as the pork cooked the drops of hot fat continually fell on the victim's bare flesh. Jacobs also discussed the ramifications of slavery beyond personal abuse. The insurrection of Nat Turner ( ) had a direct affect on the town in which she lived; the white slaveholders, terrified that their slaves might stage a similar uprising, spared no efforts to squelch even the remotest possibility of such a rebellion and the result was that many innocent Blacks were brutally beaten or killed.

Even after the Civil War was over Black writers continued to write frequently about the horrors of slavery. No Emancipation Proclamation and no war could blot from their memories either the horrors which they themselves or their loved ancestors had experienced under America's "peculiar institution." This emphasis on the days of slavery was evident in a number of autobiographies written by Blacks in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century.

One who spoke of her days in slavery was Elizabeth Keckley who for many years was dressmaker for Mrs. Abraham Lincoln. Keckley's autobiography, Behind the Scenes (1868) sold very well during her lifetime as the public was keenly interested in reading all available gossip about Mrs. Lincoln. Keckley gave the public a lot of the intimate details it was clamoring for, but she also included some information her readers might have found less welcome. She spoke of how her owner sold his slaves whenever he was short of cash without the slightest regard for their feelings. At one time he sold the young son of his faithful cook in much the same manner in which he sold his hogs; he put the child on a scale and sold him for so much a pound. The grieving mother was whipped because her owner disliked seeing a sorrowful face on anyone of his slaves and punished any slave who offended him in this manner.

Amanda Smith in her book, An Autobiography (1893), spoke of her parents' involvement in the underground railroad and of the clever methods they used to help runaway slaves escape to freedom in the North. She spoke also of cruelties to which she was exposed as the time she went to Maryland to try to purchase her sister who was a slave in that state. En route she felt faint and weak from thirst and asked a white woman for permission to drink water from the woman's well. The woman, apparently much dismayed at such a horrifying prospect, refused the request and told Smith to get moving.

Julia Foote in the first chapter "Birth and Parentage" of her autobiography, A Brand Plucked From the Fire (1886), also detailed the horrors her family experienced as slaves. She remembered with particular horror a severe beating she received as a small child for the supposed theft of some cakes which she hadn't even touched.

Post Civil War writers of fiction expressed the continuity of interest in slavery shown by autobiographers. The two most outstanding Afro-American women writers of fiction during this period were Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins.

Harper wrote only one novel, Iola Leroy which is set before, during and after the Civil War. In the chapters dealing with the pre Civil War period Harper depicts the conditions under which the slaves lived. Even those that appeared best off had to suffer the humiliation of merely being partonized. A major character in the novel, Robert Johnson, a house servant, was fondled by his mistress as a pet and even taught to read, but her affection for her little pet did not prevent her from selling his mother away from him when he was but a young child; for this, of course, Johnson could never forgive her no matter how well he was treated. Harper's emphasis was not only on the exploitation of an enslaved people, but also on their ability to survive even in the midst of the most dismal prospects. She showed their cleverness in inventing a private phraseology to converse with one another and in managing to escape to join the Union Army.

> Although the slaves were denied unrestricted travel and the holding of meetings without the surveillance of a white man yet they contrived to meet by stealth and hold meetings

> where they could mingle their prayers and tears
> and lay plans for escaping to the Union Army.
> Outwitting the vigilance of the patrollers and
> homeguards, they established these meetings
> miles apart extending into several states.[5]

The most prolific of all Afro-American writers of fiction was Pauline Hopkins only one of whose works, Contending Forces, has been published in book form. The rest of her novels, stories and essays appeared in the Colored American Magazine which was published monthly for several years at the turn of the century.

Contending Forces revolves around the Montfort family who came to North Carolina from Bermuda because Mr. Montfort wished to avoid complying with the British law requiring the gradual emancipation of all slaves in the British commonwealth. A Mr. Pollock, jealous of Montfort's wealth and success, spread the rumor that Montfort's wife was of African descent and the rumor was readily believed. Hopkins obviously wished to show that in a land of mulattoes, quadroons and octaroons such rumors found easy credence and in this case destroyed an entire family. When Montfort died his wife and children were instantly remanded into slavery based entirely on the faith place in a rumor. So adamant was the white man in his definition of "Black" (any person with any Black ancestry) that he exposed his own race to slavery rather than alter his views.

The entire plot of another of Hopkins' novels, Winona, is set during the days of slavery; it is the story of a young girl, Winona, who is the daughter of a white man and his mulatto wife. Winona's mother died in childbirth and her father was murdered when she was a young girl. Needless to say as the daughter of a mulatto she was immediately remanded into slavery upon the death of her father. The story revolves around a young Englishman who tried to aid Winona and eventually fell in love with her. When they were finally united at the close of the novel they resolved to live in England and their comments about the United States illustrate Hopkins disillusionment with America. The young Englishman, Warren Maxwell, invoked the almighty: "God being my helper, I'll never set foot on the soil of the greatest Republic on earth again."[6] Winona echoed her fiance's sentiments in her outright rejection of America: "This country mine?

No, No! The fearful things that I have seen... My father's country shall be mine."[7] Less well known writers like Octavia Rogers Albert also addressed themselves to a depiction of slavery. In her work, The House of Bondage (1891), she expressed bitterness at the inadequate presentation of the slave experience in the nation's history books. "The Spanish Inquisition can hardly compare with the punishments visited upon this once enslaved race."[8] To expand her portrayal of the days of slavery she created two characters, Charolette Brooks and Uncle John, who narrated their experiences as slaves.

The injustices found in the "free" North both before and after the Civil War were also vividly depicted by Afro-American women of the Nineteenth Century.

One of the earliest to take pen in hand and record the injustices found in the North was a wealthy young Philadelphia woman, Charlotte Forten, who kept a diary covering the years 1854-1864. Her grandfather, James Forten, who lived in England for a year, became the proprietor of a sailmaking business and achieved a position of prominence and wealth. Charlotte was the daughter of his son Robert who carried on the family business. She was raised in an atmosphere of affluence and comfort and rather than allow her to attend the segregated schools of Philadelphia her father had her tutored at home. When she was sixteen Robert Forten sent her to school in Salem, Massachusetts because the schools there were integrated and because she would be able to live with a family friend while completing her education. In 1855 she graduated from the Higginson Grammar School and in 1865 she graduated from Salem Normal School. In her diary, which she commenced during her Salem schooldays, she expressed unhappiness with American society as she found it. She voiced a longing to live in England where she felt that she (like her grandfather) might dwell in peace and with dignity "far from my native land where I am hated and oppressed because God has given me a dark skin."[9] Forten, surrounded by whites in Salem, expressed dismay at the difficulty she had in not being able to trust any white people. She was saddened to find that white classmates who treated her with friendship and cordiality in the classroom pretended not to recognize her when they met her perchance on the street.

> Oh, it is hard to go through life meeting contempt, hatred with hatred, fearing, with too good reason to love and trust hardly anyone whose skin is white however lovable, attractive and congenial he may seem.[10]

When she visited Independence Hall in Philadelphia she called the Liberty Bell and the other relics there a "mockery."[11]

The slave narrators Jacobs and Keckley, also depicted their experiences in the North. Like Forten Jacobs found it very difficult to develop any trust in white people. Surrounded by whites in the North she wrote, "I longed for someone to confide in, but I had been so deceived by white people that I had lost all confidence in them."[12] Later in her life Jacobs experienced living in England where she reported she was treated without reference to her color and for the first time in her life she felt herself to be a truly free woman. Such freedom was impossible in the Northern states of America which she described as abounding with Jim Crow transportation and segregated schools and churches. Jacobs constantly demanded her rights a course of action she advised all Black people to follow so that "eventually we shall cease to be trampled underfoot by our oppressors."[13]

Keckley too found that the North offered the ex slaves more hostility than friendship. "For one kind word spoken, two harsh ones were uttered." Not even the greatest Black leaders were awarded the respect they so obviously deserved. At President Lincoln's second inauguration orders were issued not to admit any Black people. Thus Frederick Douglass was forced to stand outside the inauguration chambers until someone called this indignity to the president's attention and he ordered Douglass to be admitted.

Awareness of and concern about racial injustices continued to be reflected in the autobiographies of Blacks written in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century. In 1902 Susie King Taylor published her autobiography, Reminiscences of My Life in Camp, in which she delineated her experiences as a teacher and laundress for an all Black regiment during the Civil War. In this autobiography she mentioned an article which she read in a newspaper in 1880 which stated that a group known as the

Confederate Daughters had sent a petition to the managers of local theaters in Tennessee to prohibit the performance of Uncle Tom's Cabin on the grounds that it offered a very distorted picture of slavery and would have a very harmful effect on the young. An outraged King asked:

> Do these Confederate Daughters ever send petitions to prohibit the atrocious lynchings and wholesale murdering and torture of the negro? Do you ever hear of them fearing this would have a bad effect on the children? Which of these two, the drama or the present state of affairs, makes a degrading impression upon the minds of the younger generation?[15]

One of the most outspoken critics of Nineteenth Century racial injustice was Ida Wells Barnett who devoted her entire life to an anti lynching crusade. Her career as a crusader began when she was fired from her job as a teacher in 1891 because of an editorial which she wrote in the Memphis Free Speech and Headlight of which she was part owner. In the editorial she made a stinging attack on the schools available to Black children in Memphis at that time. After she was fired she devoted all of her time and energy to writing articles attacking lynching. In 1812 three Black grocery store proprietors in Memphis were lynched and Barnett, in her paper, urged Blacks to leave Memphis which they did in great numbers. Barnett also served as an organizer of a streetcar boycott by Blacks in Memphis at that time. While she was out of town on a visit to Philadelphia shortly thereafter, her newspaper office was destroyed and the business manager, J. P. Fleming, was run out of town. The mob left a note at the newspaper office saying that anyone trying to publish the paper again would be punished with death. Barnett knew enough about her white Southern contemporaries to take this threat seriously, so instead of trying to re-establish her paper she took a job with The New York Age where she continued her crusade against lynching. In her autobiography, Crusade for Justice, published posthumously in 1970 by her daughter, Barnett gave a vivid account of her personal struggle to report the facts about every lynching she investigated.

Writers of fiction and poetry also depicted the injustices of the post Civil War era. Black unity was a potentiality whites feared from the

days of slavery. In most states Slaves were forbidden to learn reading and writing so that they would be unable to communicate with one another. Blacks who came from the same geographical area in Africa were separated upon arrival in the colonies (later states) to minimize communication. Travel and group gatherings involving slaves were both severely restricted. The treatment of Blacks after the Civil War wasn't much of an improvement in their condition and so it should not be surprising that efforts among whites to minimize unity among Blacks continued after the Civil War. One of Hopkins' characters in Contending Forces, Dora Smith, asked her mother why Southern Blacks seemed to be so prejudiced against Northern Blacks. Her mother replied, "Sectional prejudice has always been fostered by the Southern Whites among the negroes to stifle natural feelings of brotherly love among us. Dissension means disunion."[16] Hopkins also created characters who showed a keen awareness of how they were used by white politicians. One such character was John Langley (Contending Forces) a Black political leader who could not resist letting a white politician know that he was well aware of the game that was being played with Black voters.

> "It's votes you want and after you get them, and all the subsidies, corporations and trusts are riding easily on the front seat of the coach for another year, you won't know us; and robbing and killing the Black man can go right on.[17]

Near the conclusion of Contending Forces Black leaders in Boston held a meeting to rally forces to oppose lynching and other injustices against Black people. The speakers questioned white people's objectivity in place of white people's desire to be objective in assessing the plight of America's Black population. One speaker, Luke Sawyer, harked back to the days of the American Revolution to make his point.

> A tax placed too heavy on tea and things like that made the American colonies go to war with Great Britain to get their liberty. I ask you what do you think the American colonists would have done if they had suffered as we have suffered and are still suffering.[18]

Another speaker at the meeting, Will Smith elaborated what that suffering involved.

> If the negro votes he is shot; if he marries a white woman he is shot; if he accumulates property he is shot-he is a pariah whom the National Government cannot defend. But if he defends himself and his home, then is heard the tread of marching feet as Federal troops move southward to quell a "race riot."[19]

The papers reporting on this meeting the next day only said that a very interesting conference of Black leaders had taken place the night before. Pauline Hopkins was obviously making the point that the views of Black Americans were not even made known to the general public because of suppression by the media.

In Iola Leroy Frances Harper placed particular emphasis on depicting the hypocrisy of Northern whites. After the Civil War Iola Leroy, who had been a slave, went to live and work in the North. Since she was light enough to pass as white all went well for her until she revealed her racial identity at which point she invariably lost her job and/or was thrown out of whatever rooming house she was living in at that time. A perceptive white man who finally gave Iola a job remarked, "In dealing with Southern prejudice against the negro, we Northerners could do it with better grace if we first divested ourselves of our own."[20] Harper too expressed her disgust about lynchings. One of her leading characters in Iola Leroy, Robert Johnson, spoke of the lack of government protection for Blacks. "What protection does the colored man receive from the hands of the government? I know of no civilized country outside of America where men are still burned for real or supposed crimes."[21] Another character in Iola Leroy, a Mr. Langhorne, also deplored the unfair system of justice available to Blacks. "I know red handed murderers who walk in this Republic unwhipped of justice and I have seen a colored woman sentenced to prison for weeks for stealing twenty-five cents."[22]

But all was not despair and gloom amongst Black women writers. Although they saw little in their immediate environment to give them comfort, they had confidence in the strength and ability of their people. After Iola Leroy's school was burned by an arsonist she did not despair. "I am not despondent of the future of my people; there is too much elasticity in their spirits, much hope in their hearts, to be crushed

out by unreasoning malice."[23] Octavia Rogers Albert in The House of Bondage spoke with admiration and enthusiasm of the achievements of Blacks who held office in the post Civil War period and who, in spite of their lack of education, acquitted themselves admirably.

Perhaps the greatest optimism for the future amidst the severest indictment of the present was expressed by a very talented but little known Nineteenth century poetess, Josephine Heard, who published a slim volume of verse, Morning Glories, in 1890. Two of her poems, "The Black Samson" and "They Are Coming", show her disgust with the current plight of Blacks and her hopes for the future. Both her hope and her despair are evident in the final stanza of "The Black Samson."

> Fair Columbia's filthy garments are all stained;
> In her courts is blinded justice rudely chained;
> The black Samson is awaking
> And the fetters fiercely breaking
> By his mighty arm his rights shall be obtained[24]

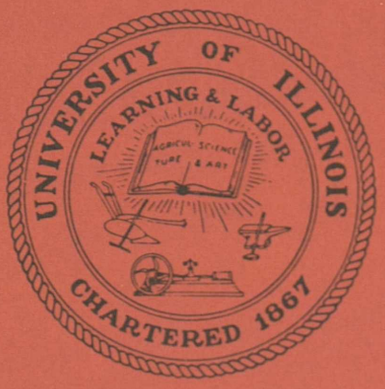
Obviously Heard did not perceive that justice would be meted out to blacks by penitent and contrite whites suddenly perceiving of themselves as evil sinners who must make amends; rather the Black Samson would have to insist upon his rights if he were ever to obtain them. A similar but somewhat more subdued tone is evident in "They Are Coming." In this poem Heard referred to a "swarthy hued procession"[25] with victory perched "on their banners head."[25] This procession stepped forth "from the depths of our oppression,"[25] but some of its members had experienced the sweet taste of success.

> They Are Coming, they are coming-
> Listen! You will hear the humming
> Of the thousands that are falling into line:
> There are Doctors, Lawyers, Preachers;
> There are Sculptors, Poets, Teachers-
> Men and women, who with honor yet shall shine.[26]

There can be no doubt of the fact that politics as they related to racial issues were of deep concern to Nineteenth Century Afro-American Women Writers. It would indeed have been difficult to be a Nineteenth Century Black and not have been deeply concerned about racial issues.

NOTES

1. "The Outlook for Feminism," New York Times, Friday, June 19, 1981, p. B4.
2. Thomas Jefferson. "Notes on the State of Virginia," The American Tradition in Literature, ed. Sculley Bradley et al (Grosset and Dunlap: New York, 1974), p. 315.
3. Ann Plato: Essays: Prose and Poetry (Hartford, Conn., 1841), p. 115.
4. Ibid, p. 110.
5. Frances Harper. Iola Leroy (Garrigries Bros., Philadelphia 1892), p. 13.
6. Pauline Hopkins: Contending Forces (Southern Illinois University Press; Carbondale, Illinois, 1978), p. 352.
7. Ibid, p. 353.
8. Octavia Rogers Albert: The House of Bondage: Hunt and Eaton; New York, 1891, p. 2.
9. Charlotte Forten: The Journal of Charlotte Forten, ed. Allen Billington (Collier MacMillan; London, 1961), p. 54.
10. Ibid, p. 74.
11. Ibid, p. 103.
12. Harriet Jacobs: Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, (Negro History Press; Boston, 1851), p. 255.
13. Ibid, p. 267.
14. Elizabeth Keckley: Behind the Scenes (G. W. Carleton and Co.; New York, 1868), p. 11.
15. Susie King Taylor: Reminiscence of My Life in Camp (Boston, 1902), p. 66.
16. Hopkins, Pauline: Contending Forces, p. 181.
17. Ibid, p. 235.
18. Ibid, p. 262.
19. Ibid, p. 271.
20. Harper, Frances: Iola Leroy, p. 212.
21. Ibid, p. 224.
22. Ibid, p. 255.
23. Ibid, p. 147.
24. Heard, Josephine: Noted Negro Women, ed. M. A. Mayors (Donohue and Hennebury; Chicago, 1893), p. 264.
25. Ibid, p. 264.
26. Ibid, p. 265.



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